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Oh, the places you've taken us: *RT*'s tribute to Dr. Seuss

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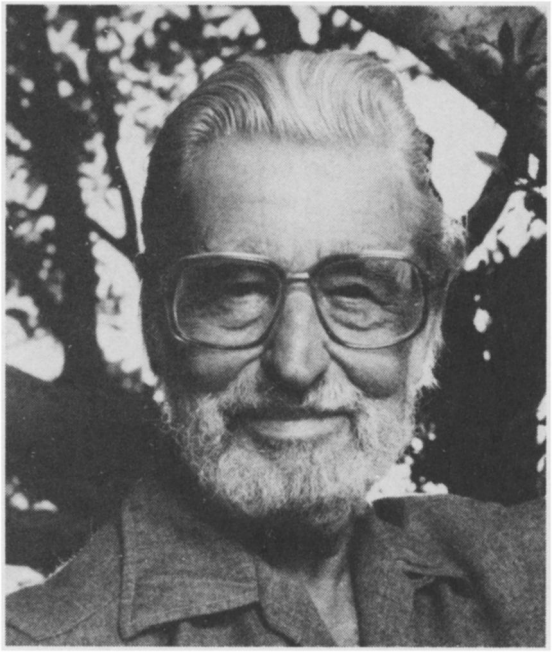


Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel) 1904-1991. Photo by Aaron Rapoport/Onxy, 1986

And when things start to happen,
don't worry. Don't stew.
Just go right along.
You'll start happening too.
OH! THE PLACES YOU'LL GO!
You'll be on your way up!
You'll be seeing great sights!
You'll join the high fliers
who soar to high heights.

(From *Oh, The Places You'll Go!* by Dr. Seuss. Copyright ©1990 by Theodor S. Geisel and Audrey S. Geisel, Trustees under Trust Agreement dated August 27, 1984. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc. and HarperCollins Publishers.)

The above excerpt, taken from the most recent Dr. Seuss book, *Oh, The Places You'll Go* (1990), is representative of the spirit and optimism Theodor Seuss Geisel offered to children *of all ages* for the last half century. When Geisel died on September 24, 1991, in his California home at the age of 87, he left many sad hearts, but he also left a rich legacy of "great sights and high heights." And what he also left us was the encouragement to explore life's journey with the same enthusiasm he had. Thus, we write this tribute to Dr. Seuss to acknowledge and celebrate his contributions to children's literature and to the lives of both adults and children around the world.

Beware of the Cat!

Dr. Seuss is a household name, but just who was the man behind the name? Dr. Seuss

was a legendary author who lived in a converted lighthouse with a sign that read "Beware of the Cat." And, he was the creator of such well loved characters as Bartholomew Cubbins, the Lorax, Sam-I-Am, and the Cat in the Hat. More than 200 million copies of his 47 books have been purchased by parents, grandparents, and children in Japan, Israel, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Italy, Brazil, and the countries of the British Commonwealth over the last 54 years.

However, the famous author was not always known as Dr. Seuss. Born in Springfield, Massachusetts, on March 2, 1904, he was known by his given name Theodor Geisel until he became involved in a minor infraction of school rules while attending Dartmouth College. After being dismissed from his post as editor-in-chief of the college humor magazine *Jack-o-Lantern* as a result of his shenanigans, he started using his middle name, Seuss, in order to continue writing for the magazine. When he dropped out of Oxford University in 1927, where he was studying English literature, he added "Dr." to his middle name because he did not want to disappoint his father. Even though he assumed various nicknames during the 1920s—such as Theo Seuss 2nd and Dr. Theophrastus Seuss—the name Dr. Seuss brought Theodor Geisel the most fame. A string of honorary doctorates, the first one from his alma mater, Dartmouth College, and the most recent from Princeton University, added academic credentials to the already world-famous doctor's reputation.

While attending Oxford, his attention was diverted by classmate Helen Palmer, who urged Geisel to pursue an art career. Her advice motivated him to leave the university and travel through Europe in 1926-27. During his travels, Geisel produced drawings representative of what he called his "Roman and Florentine Period." His travels completed, he returned to the United States in 1927, where his exotic animals doing the cocktail-party circuit were an uncommon subject for cartoons. A genius at creating a page crowded with images and spiced with a telling line of dialogue, he insightfully recorded the mores of society in popular humor magazines. He also expressed a political sensibility in his work from his earliest Dartmouth drawings of the 1920s to his explicit political cartoons of the early 1940s (Brezzo, 1986).

When his work was spotted by a Standard Oil advertising executive, Seuss was contracted to develop an ad campaign for the oil company. He also created other advertising campaigns for Schaefer Bock Beer, Ford Motor Company, Atlas Products, New Departure Bearings, NBC Radio, and Holly Sugar.

In 1927, Seuss married the former Oxford classmate, Helen Palmer, who had encouraged his art career. Palmer would remain his wife and business partner until her death 40 years later.

Seuss stumbled on the idea of writing children's books when he illustrated *Boners*

Photo by Larry Compton

(1931), a collection of schoolboy cartoons. He illustrated this publication in an attempt to circumvent his advertising contract which prohibited him from most commercial publishing ventures. Seuss did not want to be limited to illustrating, however, and in 1937 wrote, for his own amusement, his first full-length book *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*. In the atmosphere of 1930s children's books, *Mulberry Street* became an instant hit once Seuss managed to convince publishers to accept it. "The Seuss style was born fully developed: looping, free-style drawings; clanging, infectious rhymes; and a relentless logic" (Kanfer, 1991, p. 71).

With the publication of *The Cat in the Hat* (1957), Random House (publisher of all the Dr. Seuss books since 1939) created a special division, Beginner Books, with Seuss as president. Best seller followed best seller; prize followed award. For example, Seuss was awarded an Oscar for the animated cartoon "Gerald McBoing-Boing" (1951), an Emmy for *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* television special (1982), and a Pulitzer citation in 1984 for his overall contributions to the field of children's literature. His book *Green Eggs and Ham* (1960) was so successful that children actually mailed Seuss green eggs and ham as tokens of affection! In 1968 Seuss launched another learn-to-read concept with the creation of *The Foot Book*, and pioneered a new Random House division for preschool and kindergarten readers: Bright & Early Books.

Seuss created some of his most language-conscious works during the 1970s, including *There's a Wocket in My Pocket* (1974), *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* (1978), and *Oh Say Can You Say?* (1979). These books helped establish the idea that children could experiment with language by reading humorous and appealing stories.

In 1984 the words of Dr. Seuss made headlines when *The Butter Battle Book* set a world's record by appearing for 6 months on *The New York Times* adult best-seller list. New York governor Mario Cuomo urged everyone to read this "magnificent little volume" for a clearer understanding of the issues surrounding nuclear war. And Seuss's final work, *Oh, the Places You'll Go* (1990) approached life the way Geisel did, as a journey in which one could "move mountains."

"He writes to amuse himself"

How did Dr. Seuss start writing? Why did he draw such wild pictures? And how did he think up those crazy places and names? In other words, as one 8-year-old fan wrote, "Dear Dr. Seuss, you sure thunk up a lot of funny books. You sure thunk up a million funny animals....Who thunk you up, Dr. Seuss?" (Freeman, 1969, p. 12).

What was his answer? Seuss described his illustrations in this way: "My animals look the way they do because I can't draw" (Bunzel, 1959, p. 107). Seuss also claimed that he could think up and draw such unusual places with such crazy animals because he had been to most of those places before. The animals' names were no problem to spell, he said, because he kept a special dictionary with each animal listed in it for quick reference (Bunzel, 1959).

As for his stories, Seuss's first wife and business partner, Helen, explained, "Ted doesn't sit down and write for children. He writes to amuse himself. Luckily what amuses him also amuses them" (Bunzel, 1959, p. 113). Such amusement was usually inspired by conversations, overheard phrases, or as an accompaniment to some of his doodling. Sometimes rhythms would pop into his head, as the title of *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* did. Seuss described the book as being written for "no lofty reason whatsoever."

> "In the fall of 1936, while aboard the S.S. Kungsholm on a long rainy crossing of the Atlantic, I amused myself by putting words to the rhythm of the ship's engine. The words turned out to be *And to think that I saw it on Mulberry Street.*" (Hopkins, 1969, p. 255-256)

While *Mulberry Street* grew out of the rhythm of a ship's engines, *Bartholomew and the Oobleck* (1949) was inspired by something Seuss overheard a fellow G.I. say as they passed on a muddy street in France during World War II.

> " 'Rain! Always rain comes down!' one soldier was muttering as he passed me. 'Why can't something new, something different, come down?'....I stood there in the wet with an exciting idea running around and around in my head. Maybe something new could come down!" (Commire, 1982, p. 113)

The Cat in the Hat, perhaps the most famous Dr. Seuss book, was, in contrast, the result of a concerted effort to write a particular kind of book. In the mid-1950s author John Hersey wrote an article in *Life* magazine condemning the Dick-and-Jane type of writing found in elementary school readers. Hersey challenged Dr. Seuss to use his skill to create books with controlled vocabulary which could still appeal to children. Seuss took up the challenge. He received a contract and a public school word list from a publishing company, and he started to write.

> "Writing children's books is hard work, a lot harder than most people realize, and that includes most writers of children's books. And it never gets any easier. I remember thinking that I might be able to dash off *The Cat in the Hat* in two or three weeks. Actually, it took over a year. You try telling a pretty

complicated story using less than two hundred and fifty words! No, don't, unless you're willing to write and rewrite." (Commire, 1982, p. 114)

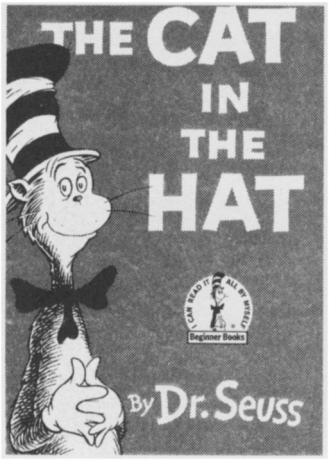
Writing such a book was apparently so difficult that Seuss almost gave up. The popular story behind the writing of this book says that in frustration Seuss was looking through discarded sketches when he happened to spot one of a cat. Seuss took another look at the word list and two words which rhymed jumped out at him: cat and hat. At that moment, the infamous cat in the stovepipe hat was born (Freeman, 1969, p. 13).

The number-one selling Seuss book, *Green Eggs and Ham*, was written as a result of a bet with his publisher at Random House, the late Bennett Cerf (Clifford, 1991). Cerf bet Seuss that he could not write a book using only 50 words. Not only did Seuss manage to write such a book, but he wrote a best seller! According to Jane Clifford of the *San Diego Tribune* (1991), Seuss once said that *Green Eggs and Ham* was the only book he had written that still made him laugh.

Although Dr. Seuss described his work as being written for children, the meanings and purposes behind his books have long been a source of speculation. Critics often asserted that Seuss set out to write didactic moral lessons. According to children's literature critic E.J. Kahn, "In his books might never makes right, the meek inherit the earth, and pride frequently goeth before a fall, usually a pratfall" (cited in Clifford, 1991, p. C1).

Seuss, however, scoffed at the notion that he wrote to convey a moral message. The author claimed that he never wrote with a moral message in mind, but he did admit that morals developed naturally from the plots of his stories (Lingemann, 1976). Said Seuss in an interview, "Kids...can see a moral coming a mile off and they gag at it. But there's an inherent moral in any story" (Bunzel, 1959, p. 113).

One popular Seuss book often cited for its allegedly moral purpose is *Horton Hatches the Egg* (1940). According to Seuss, however, the book was written as a result of his doodlings of an elephant on a piece of transparent paper. The paper had been shifted about on his desktop when Seuss noticed it lying atop a sketch of a tree. "I stopped, dumbfounded. I said to myself, 'That's a hell of a situation. An elephant in a tree! What's he doing there?'"



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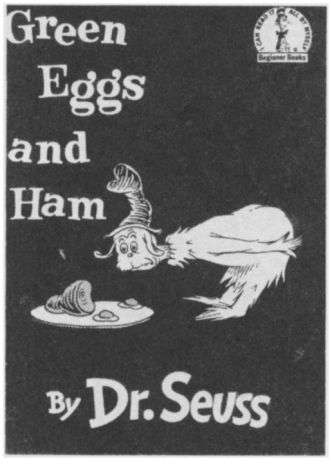

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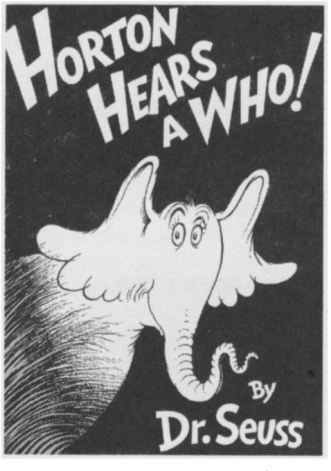

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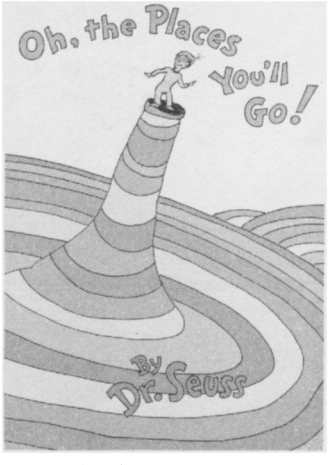

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(Kahn, 1960, cited in Commire, 1982, p. 111). Almost a month later, Seuss found himself in the midst of creating a story about an elephant playing surrogate for a duck.

Dr. Seuss was adamant about writing to have fun, which usually helped him produce books that children could have fun with, too. "My books don't insult their [children's] intelligence. Maybe it's because I'm on their level. When I dropped out of Oxford, I decided to be a child, so it's not some condescending adult writing" (*Parenting*, 1987, in Clifford, 1991, p. C2).

Apparently, Seuss drew a fine line between moralizing and examining issues. While Seuss denied sending moral messages, he never denied writing about issues. "It's impossible to write anything without making a statement in some way" (Freeman, 1969, p. 13). For example, Seuss wrote *Yertle the Turtle* (1958) as a reaction against the fascism of World War II, *The Lorax* (1971) in response to environmental concerns, and *The Butter Battle Book* (1984) to reflect on nuclear proliferation. *The Lorax* (which Seuss listed as his favorite) stirred up such negative feelings in

Storybooks by Dr. Seuss

(1937) *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street.* New York: Vanguard Press.
(1938) *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins.* New York: Vanguard Press.
(1939) *The Seven Lady Godivas.* New York: Random House.
(1939) *The King's Stilts.* New York: Random House.
(1940) *Horton Hatches the Egg.* New York: Random House.
(1947) *McElligot's Pool.* New York: Random House. (Caldecott Honor Book)
(1948) *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose.* New York: Random House.
(1949) *Bartholomew and the Oobleck.* New York: Random House. (Caldecott Honor Book)
(1950) *If I Ran the Zoo.* New York: Random House. (Caldecott Honor Book)
(1953) *Scrambled Eggs Super!* New York: Random House.
(1954) *Horton Hears a Who!* New York: Random House.
(1955) *On Beyond Zebra!* New York: Random House.
(1956) *If I Ran the Circus.* New York: Random House.
(1957) *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* New York: Random House.
(1957) *The Cat in the Hat.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1958) *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1958) *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories.* New York: Random House.
(1959) *Happy Birthday to You!* New York: Random House.
(1960) *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1960) *Green Eggs and Ham.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1961) *The Sneetches and Other Stories.* New York: Random House.
(1962) *Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book.* New York: Random House.
(1963) *Dr. Seuss's ABC.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1963) *Hop on Pop.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1965) *Fox in Sox.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1965) *I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew.* New York: Random House.
(1967) *The Cat in the Hat Song Book.* New York: Random House.
(1968) *The Foot Book.* New York: Bright & Early Books, Random House.
(1969) *I Can Lick 30 Tigers Today! and Other Stories.* New York: Random House.
(1970) *I Can Draw It Myself.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1970) *Mr. Brown Can Moo! Can You?* New York: Bright & Early Books, Random House.
(1971) *The Lorax.* New York: Random House.
(1972) *Marvin K. Mooney Will You Please Go Now!* New York: Bright & Early Books, Random House.
(1973) *Did I Ever Tell You How Lucky You Are?* New York: Random House.
(1973) *The Shape of Me and Other Stuff.* New York: Bright & Early Books, Random House.
(1974) *There's a Wocket in My Pocket!* New York: Bright & Early Books, Random House.
(1975) *Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1976) *The Cat's Quizzer.* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1978) *I Can Read with My Eyes Shut!* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1979) *Oh Say Can You Say?* New York: Beginner Books, Random House.
(1982) *Hunches in Bunches.* New York: Random House.
(1984) *The Butter Battle Book.* New York: Random House.
(1986) *You're Only Old Once!* New York: Random House.
(1990) *Oh, the Places You'll Go.* New York: Random House.

the lumber industry in the northwestern United States that some schools considered banning its inclusion on school reading lists. Seuss argued that while the book was political, "propaganda with a plot," he also stated that it was a result of his frustration with the waste of natural resources in the world in general, not a direct attack against specific industries in the USA (Lamb, 1991).

Regardless of the meanings critics extended to Seuss books, his personal reason for writing was clear: Seuss wanted to write so children could have fun reading. "I'm trying to capture an audience. Most every child learning to read has problems, and I am just saying to them that reading is fun" (*New York Times*, 1968, cited in Commire, 1982, p. 116).

"You make 'em, I'll amuse 'em"

Whenever Seuss was asked about why he had remained childless throughout his lifetime, he consistently responded, "You make 'em, and I'll amuse 'em" (Freeman, 1969, p. 13). And amuse them, he did. Whatever critics may say about the messages Dr. Seuss's books convey, none can deny the immense popularity the legendary author enjoyed throughout his lifetime. All of the 47 Dr. Seuss books he wrote and illustrated during his 54-year career are still in print. In addition, Geisel published several other books under the pseudonym "Theo LeSieg," ("LeSieg" is "Geisel" spelled backward).

Young fans were frequent, albeit uninvited, visitors at the Seuss home in La Jolla, California, and letters of admiration poured in by the thousands (Clifford, 1991). One 9-year-old once wrote Seuss that "This was the funniest book I ever read in nine years," while another declared, "Dr. Seuss, you have an imagination with a long tail!" (Freeman, 1969, p. 12).

The secret to the enduring popularity of Seuss books lies in the fact that Seuss wrote with a "sense of anarchy," claims Peter Neumeyer, children's literature professor at San Diego State University (Lamb, 1991). But children's literature critic Lorrene Love Ort offered a different explanation in 1955 when she asserted that Seuss provided children with a sense of "secure suspense" in his wild explorations of the imagination (Ort, 1955). Maurice Sendak, author of such children's favorites as *Where the Wild Things Are,* saw Seuss as a "mischief-maker and revolutionary" who was "on the side of the kids" (Emerson, 1991). Sendak called Seuss "the big papa," saying that the inspiration for his own books was drawn from the early work of Dr. Seuss (Lamb, 1991). Charlotte Zolotow, author and publisher of children's books, said of Seuss, "He went straight to the most elemental feeling that people had, and the characteristics of certain personalities, and he caught it with a sense of mischief and fun and compassion and understanding" (Emerson, 1991, p. E8). In his essay "Psychological Aspects of Nonsense Literature for Children," Leo Schneiderman credits Seuss with providing children an opportunity to experiment with independence, imagination, and problem-solving (Schneiderman, 1989).

Such sentiments are heard not only from fellow writers and children's literature critics, but from children, parents, and teachers who have spent time with Dr. Seuss over the last half-century. In fact, we asked several *RT* readers to reminisce about Dr. Seuss so we could share these thoughts. The first respondent, Jackie Conaway, a grandmother who often buys Dr. Seuss books to augment her grandchildren's collections, related this anecdote:

> When my children were young, we spent several vacations at cabins in Wisconsin fishing with my in-laws. We, of course, always took along a large bag of books for the trip and for any rainy days we might encounter. My father-in-law was a very loving, caring man who would do anything for his grandchildren. He was not a skilled "read-aloud" reader, but he always obliged the children when they requested a story. They usually chose a book by Dr. Seuss. They would race for a spot right next to Grandpa, and once they were settled, he would read along gamely in his monotone, "Fox, Socks, Box, Knox, Knox in box. Fox in socks. Knox on Fox in socks in box....Sue sews socks of fox in socks now." He hesitated at times, grinning at the potpourri of language. The children's eyes were glued to the pages—they knew every word—it did not matter that Grandpa was reading in a monotone. What mattered to them was that Grandpa was sharing himself with them. What a winning combination—Grandpa and Dr. Seuss!

"He never even really grew up"

Theodor Seuss Geisel worked diligently at his craft of entertaining children and adults with fun stories that often carried important messages, intended or not. Writing was a struggle for him because he had such a high

regard for children. "Children have as much right to quality as their elders," Seuss stated in one interview (Bunzel, 1959, p. 113). Perhaps Seuss realized the importance of amusing, exciting, exuberant literature for children because he was still a child at heart. According to Judith Morton, friend and biographer of the late author, "Ted never grew old. He never even really grew up. Each of our visits...was a joyful, mischievous revelation with his wonderfully skewed view of the world which was also his defense against its pomposity and foolishness" (Lamb, 1991, p. A8). Morton's statement leaves us with an optimistic feeling. Although Dr. Seuss is gone from our world, he has not, like the fickle cat he created, simply disappeared with a tip of his hat. Dr. Seuss has left us a treasury of literature by which we can visit and journey with him for generations to come.

Oh, the places you've taken us! Thanks, Dr. Seuss.

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